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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FLOATING WORKERS

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I

The evolution of productive factors is characterized by a gradual replacement of physical exertion by mental—of muscles by brains. The human being as motive power in the process of production is becoming more and more a directing power—in the sense that he directs the machines that do the actual work. Thus the imaginative and attentive abilities—will power, discipline, in short, the psychology of laborers—are gaining more importance, viewed from the standpoint of efficiency in production.

Notwithstanding the interdependence of efficiency and general well-being of the worker—a fact generally accepted in theory—the psychology of workers has not to any extent been studied either by the efficiency experts or by psychologists and sociologists. In this brief article are given some of the results of an investigation of the psychology of unskilled laborers which was made by the writer in 1913–1915 for the United States Commission on Industrial Relations.

II

In the normal times, before the present war,¹ it was a well-recognized fact that the numbers of the unskilled laborers were increasing rapidly as compared with the numbers of the skilled, and that the numbers of the lowest grades of the unskilled laborers—called migratory and casual laborers, drifters, hoboes, rounders, blanket-stiffs, etc., in short, the floaters—and of the unemployables—called tramps, bums, snow-birds, knights of the road, vagabonds, yeggmen, petty criminals, etc., in short, the down-and-outs—were increasing more rapidly than was the general population of the United States.

There are no statistical data to show the actual numbers of these elements of the population, nor are there comparative data

¹ This article does not attempt to deal with the abnormal conditions during the time of the European War.

to indicate the tendency of their proportionate growth during periods of time. Neither is there any machinery established by which such data may be gathered.

Loose estimates, or rather guesses, put the actual numbers of the lowest grades described—floaters and down-and-outs—somewhere above five million. More reliable seems to be the impression prevailing among students of industrial problems—labor leaders, employers, charity workers and the laborers themselves—that the numbers of these laborers, and especially the men of the down-and-out type, are increasing more rapidly than are the other classes of population in the country. Such persons usually point out that:

1. Unemployment has become an ever-present condition and is increasing every year.
2. More people apply for public charity, and the public poorhouses are more crowded than ever before.
3. Begging in the streets is growing.
4. Petty larceny and other small crimes are increasing. The same tendency is noticeable in regard to suicide, homicide, insanity and desertion of family.
5. Casualization of laborers is developing—they work only certain periods of time and these periods tend to shorten as years pass.

The reports of public employment offices, the pay rolls of employers, the interviews with employers and with laborers themselves, show that the process of casualization is developing rapidly. The vast majority of a large number of employers interviewed, especially of those in the lumber and construction industries, stated to the writer that the laborers are not what they were in former times. They no longer want to work continuously. They only work for a short period, to make a "stake"; then they quit and go to the city to "blow the stake in." The saying, "one gang is working, one going, and one coming," is true to a certain degree.

To the question, what is the matter with the men, the writer received varied answers. For example:

From an employer: The men are too lazy to work; our laws, courts and police institutions are weak as regards loafing, begging and stealing; and the charity organizations in the cities demoralize rather than uplift the men, by providing them with meals and shelter without labor.

From a charity worker: Yes, the men are falling down-and-out in a greater number than ever before. For this the hard and

unhealthy conditions at the work places are responsible to a degree, but, in the main, the men themselves are defective and responsible for their misfortunes. Some inherit certain defects by birth, but the vast majority have acquired bad habits, have weakened their bodies, and have lost ambition, will-power and self-respect.

From a preacher: The fountain head of the trouble consists in the fact that the men have lost religion; if they would turn back to God, everything else with them would be all right.

From a radical labor leader, socialist, I. W. W., or union man: The existing industrial conditions, low wages, long hours, poor living, etc., are responsible for the casualization of laborers and the production of hoboos and tramps. There is nothing wrong with the men themselves; do away with these conditions and with the wage-system in general, and there would then be no more down-and-outs—the product of industrial slavery.

From an educator: The main cause of casualization is the lack of training in general character building and in trade.

From a moralist: The main cause is drinking and prostitution—saloons and red-light districts.

From a student of industrial problems: For the casualization of laborers a number of causes are responsible; rapid introduction of skill-replacing machinery and other improvements in the technique of production; seasonable character of numbers of large industries; fluctuation of market; irregularity of employment; unregulated transportation of laborers; and pressure of circumstances and environment in general. The existence of casual laborers in large numbers is an essential of the present organization of our industrial system.

These widely varied opinions about the causes of casualization show the complexity of the problem.

III

According to degrees of steadiness and efficiency at work, the unskilled laborers may be divided into the following grades:

1. *Steady Laborers*

2. *Floating, Migratory or Drifting Laborers* who are constantly moving from job to job and from locality to locality in search of work and to "better the conditions." They may be subdivided into:—(a) seasonal and (b) casual laborers.

The seasonal laborers stick either to one industry, if its season lasts for a long time, say eight or ten months, or to a number of industries the seasons of which are short and occur in succession, as, for example, in the fall in lumber camps, in winter in ice camps, in spring in farm work, in summer in harvesting, then again in lumber camps, and so on. Their method of selecting jobs has some regularity.

The casual laborers, on the other hand, have no regularity—they accept and work on whatever job they secure, in whatever industry, and for whatever concern. They may be further divided into:—(a) casual laborers proper; (b) odd-job men; and (c) hoboes. The casual laborers proper earn all their living by labor; they do not beg, apply for charity or steal.

The odd-job men are rather a city type; they seldom go to work out of the city, although they migrate from one city to another.

Hoboes are a rank of casual laborers earning most of their living by labor, willing and desirous to work, but in the time of unemployment when hard pressed, supplementing their living by such means as begging, application for charity and stealing—"taking" meals, provisions, clothes and money, though only in such quantities as to satisfy their immediate need. Their self-respect is already shattered. However, they are laborers, preferring to earn their living by honest work.

3. *Unemployables or Down-and-Outs.* The main characteristic of these men is that they do not work. They may be subdivided into: (a) unable to work; and (b) able but unwilling to work, (1) common type—tramps, bums, vagabonds, etc., and (2) criminal type—pickpockets, yeggmen and other thieves and robbers.

The above classification of our unskilled and unorganized workers shows in general the steps in the downward movement in the lives of a large number of men. First a steady worker, then a seasonal and casual worker, then a hobo, then a down-and-out. To each of these successive stations corresponds a certain psychological condition upon which human conduct depends.

IV

Ambition and hope characterize almost every young man, who, leaving his family hearth, enters the outside world for his life's battles. Ambition and hope make life bright and enjoyable. The

possessor of these natural stimuli for working and fighting has no need of artificial substitutes and of defence-reaction.

But when ambition or hope fades or is shattered, different psychological characteristics appear in a man. An unskilled laborer, working at first steadily and afterward meeting failure after failure, begins to lose ambition and hope for a better future in his life.

The causes of his failure are varied. They are the unregulated life and labor conditions in the industries where unskilled wage-earners are employed, especially in various lumber camps and work places, including the farming industry; the unregulated distribution of labor—the unorganized labor market—including the unregulated transportation of laborers, and the uncentralized short or odd jobs in the cities; the irregular and seasonal character of work in many industries; the increasing tenancy in farming and, connected with it, child labor in farming; also child labor in other industries; strikes, especially those that fail; blacklisting; the absence of protective organizations among the laborers themselves. Other causes of the worker's failure are his educational defects; lack of knowledge among the immigrants of English, trade, labor laws and American customs, institutions and ways of life; lack of knowledge of trade and labor laws among the native working masses.

These direct causes produce certain effects which in turn result in the increase of the number of floating laborers, hoboes and down-and-outs. Of the indirect causes the following are the most influential: the bad living conditions and, still worse, the moral atmosphere of floating laborers in the cities; the evils in the lodging houses, the drunkenness, the prostitution, the gambling, the lack of healthy recreation facilities, the uncertain, gloomy and almost hopeless future of floating laborers.

V

One of the first signs of the decrease in the ambition and hope of a worker is the loss of interest in his earnings. He soon quits saving for two reasons: first, all of his previous attempts in saving failed because the hard times of unemployment, or illness, or some other misfortune ate up his savings; and, second, he begins to look upon his earnings as merely a means "to keep his soul and body

together," not as a means for his success in life. In consequence he begins to work seasonally and casually. First, industries require that kind of work, and second, seasonal and casual work corresponds to his changed views and needs. These changed views and needs are his desire to be on the move, and the need to earn only a "stake," a certain sum of money, specified in his own mind at the acceptance of the job. This stake is destined to help him to prosecute his immediate plans, to buy clothes and shoes, to have a "good time," to buy meals on his travels, or what not. But the main thing is, he must move; he must change his environment so as to see something new, interesting. To this end he has always a plan in his mind—where to go and how to go.

But when the last rays of his ambition and hope are gone he becomes a self-confessed failure and falls down, first, into the rank of hoboes—still laborers—and then into the rank of down-and-outs.

In the latter state he is characterized by the following psychological features:

- (a) The passion for wandering is increased almost to madness;
- (b) He has acquired a profound aversion to work;
- (c) He drinks whenever and wherever he has a chance;
- (d) He has developed a strange, childish expectation that he may strike in some way, somewhere, a tremendously promising opportunity. This is something like the alluring dream of a rich gold strike to a prospector. If this hoped-for opportunity were such that its realization might reasonably be expected, it would recreate in him a strong enthusiasm and confidence, as a result of which he would cease drinking, and would work and battle till he won out and became a victor in life instead of a beaten man. But if one asks him of what nature is the opportunity he expects to find, he answers that it may happen that he will by chance become a prospector and strike a rich gold mine; or marry rich; or he may become a fisherman, at first for wages, afterwards independently; or he may find a very good job, working on which he will save lots of money; or he may specialize in some line of highly paid work; or he may by chance secure a homestead; or—or—

Led by such faint hope—very faint, almost nothing in his mind, but strong enough in his sentiment—he roams restlessly over all the country, from north to south, from coast to coast, back and

forth, moving from place to place by freighting or walking, seldom paying his way in his rainbow chasing.

(e) He has lost his ability to concentrate on anything sensible.

How can such psychologica! features, seemingly unnatural to any man, be explained? He is simply trying to escape from himself or to forget himself, in general. Life is dark and hopeless for him—nothing is left of his ambition, except gloomy thoughts and sad feelings.

Wonderful human nature invents other, one might say in common parlance, "artificial" substitutes for "natural" enjoyment appearing in ambition and hope. By changing environment—scenes—by constant wandering, he keeps up some sort of interest in life.

He is averse to work because his nervous system, by suffering and privation, is exhausted. Furthermore, he answers to the question why he does not want to labor: To labor! Why should I labor? I have labored, worked hard—years, tens of years, but the labor did not help, it let me fall down where I am as you see me.

But in general his idleness or "laziness" is nothing more or less than a kind of defence-reaction forced upon him by nature. In drunkenness he also finds a sort of "brightness" and forgetfulness. Rainbow chasing is again an artificial means of making his life "ambitious" and "hopeful." His lack of ability to concentrate his attention on anything is explained by the fact that he is worn-out and as a result his will-power has gone to pieces.

No law, court, police, prison, can "cure" him; nothing but medical treatment. But as medical treatment is more costly than the prevention of disease, the nation should take steps in the direction of preventing a large number of its members from falling down-and-out, beginning with the regulation of labor conditions in unskilled industries, especially in those of seasonal character.